

Jeremiah 29:11

January 3, 2021

Hope Mennonite Church

Epiphany

God's Open Road

*“For I know the plans that I have for you, says the LORD—
plans for your well-being and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).*

At some point, each one of us will face a life-changing event. Such events take many forms: Beginning school, graduation, entering the work force, dating, marriage, divorce, making new friends, major illness, job advance, career change, relocating, birth of a child, death of parents, retirement. These are just to name a few. At some point, each one of us will face a life-changing event. And even in that short list of examples I just mentioned, we notice two broad kinds of life changes, namely, **predictable** changes and **unpredictable** changes.

As we reflect on the year 2020, isn't it amazing how many small and large life changes we experienced—**all** of which were **unpredictable!**? We learned to recognize people by seeing half a face!

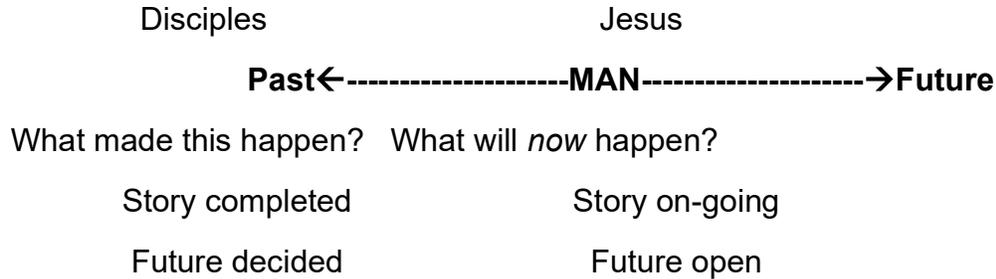
When we experience an **unexpected** life-change, it's natural to look to the **past** to explain the **present**. We wonder, “What brought this on, were there precursors, could I have seen this coming, could I have done something for things to have turned out differently?”

It's perfectly natural to look to the **past** to explain the **present**. So, it's not surprising that's what Jesus' disciples do. **They** look to the **past** to explain the **present**, specifically, to explain **another person's** life-changing event. **John 9** says the disciples encounter a man who had been born blind (**John 9:1-3**). And they ask Jesus, “Who sinned—this man or his parents?” They're looking to the **past** to explain the **present**.

But Jesus answers them from a very different perspective. He tells his disciples, “**Neither** this man **nor** his parents sinned.” Jesus does **not** look to the **past** to make sense of the **present**. Instead, he totally **refocuses** the disciples. Jesus looks to the **future** to make sense of the **present**.

Isn't that interesting? This is what Jesus says about the man born blind: "[This happened to him] so that **God's works** might be revealed in him." For Jesus, it's the **future** that is the lens through which we understand the **present**. In your bulletin, we show this graphically:

Understanding Unexpected Life-Changes



Jesus refocuses his disciples on the **future**: Given that this life-change has happened, what might **now** unfold? What will God **now** make happen? On the other side of this unexpected life-change, Jesus imagines, not a **closed** but an **open set** of possibilities ... as he says, for "**God's works** to be revealed" in this man (**John 9:3**).

Jesus teaches **us** to arrange **our** lives, not by **what happened** but by **what now?** Because **what now OPENS** the **future**.

Jeremiah 29 concurs with Jesus' perspective. **Exile**, the forced **relocation** of God's people as prisoners of war ... **Exile** ... leaving behind **everything** familiar ... culture ... language ... home ... **everything**. **Exile** was an **unexpected** and **extreme** life-change. And it lasted for **three generations** of Judeans. They find themselves in refugee camps in a foreign land. **And** it's only natural that the exiles look to the **past** to explain their **present**: "What brought this on, were there precursors, could we have seen this coming, could we have done something for things to have turned out differently?"

But God **refocuses** them on the **the future**. The LORD says, “[**In exile!**] **I** have **plans** for you ... **plans** for the **what now** ... **plans** to give you a **future with hope**.

What do you think? Is it **life changes** and **life challenges** that **make hope** come alive and **thrive**? What about 2020? Do some of its hard lessons work to **kindle hope** in us? Given COVID, political division, racism, **Jesus** asks, “**What now?** How can **God’s works** be revealed in us in these circumstances?” God has **plans** for us in 2021, for a future with **hope!**

Well, that’s our story, isn’t it ... which is **always** the story of God’s people. Our story is **always** about walking forward into **God’s future**. That’s what **faith** is. We don’t walk forward into a future of our own will, our own design, our own feasibility, our own preference, or even our own wildest dreams. The story of God’s people is **always** the story of us walking forward into **God’s future**. That way **could** be **paved** ... **OR** off **all** the beaten paths. The story of God’s people is **always** a **hero’s journey**, because it means trusting and living the life **we** didn’t plan ... and instead the life of **God’s plans** for us ... which are for our well-being, our wholeness, our shalom and not for harm ... **God’s plans** for a **future with hope**.

Now some Christians understand **God’s future** as an entirely **plottable** course, with a God we can **describe** if we just have the **ingenuity** and **stamina** to get the **doctrine** right. Skeptics of religion regard a future **with God** as absurd—antiquated, silly ... a delusional crutch from a primitive stage of human development. For them, walking into the **future** is either completely **random** ... or ... a tight little package of **reasonableness** we can explain with our five senses.

Well, the God of the Scriptures operates with **way more freedom** than either of those options. **People of faith** walk into the **future** with a God who is **not** confined to the intra-psychic drama of guilt and forgiveness, **nor** to the straight jacket of brilliant doctrinal articulation, **nor** to the explainable and reasonable. The God of the Bible has a pre-existing condition of being full of **surprises** ... yes ... an

advanced degree in serendipity. That means **God's future**, and therefore ours, is open. **What now?**

Jeremiah 31 says it: Walking into **God's future** is being a partner in a new covenant ... one that is not like any covenant God has ever made before. **Genesis 17** says it: Walking into **God's future** is saying "yes" to a God who gives babies to old people and creates from sterility a multitude of nations. **Jeremiah 30** says it: Walking into **God's future** means trusting a God who cures the incurable, redeems the unredeemable, and forgives the unforgiveable. **Ephesians 3** says it: Walking into **God's future** involves imagining beyond what can be imagined. Do you think you can stop and ask directions to that place?

God is this way because ... God has for us, not a future with *more of the same*, but a future with hope. God invites us to arrange our lives by what now. God will guide us in 2021 like the wise men, home ... by a new way.

Brothers and sisters, it's now 2021. Behind us is an unexpected, life-changing year. We may think, "What brought this on, were there precursors, could we have seen this coming, could we have done something for things to have turned out differently?" But Jesus refocuses us. As we walk into the future, God will not vaccinate us against every contingency. But God does have plans for us ... plans for well-being, wholeness, shalom. Jesus calls us to arrange our lives by what now ... to walk with hope ... and to be ready for God's works revealed in us this year!

Extra Stuff

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Lent is an opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with walking into God's future. Many practitioners of Lent would have us believe that walking with God is essentially about feeling guilty, asking for God's forgiveness, and watching God's face turn from a frown into a smile—until the next time.

See Brueggemann, *A Way Other Than Our Own*, 46-47.